

Donna Redding

Preserving the Iditarod Trail

Dogsled on the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

All photos courtesy Bureau of Land Management.

The Iditarod National Historic Trail represents the longest, most travelled gold rush trail in Alaska. It is Alaska's only national historic

trail, and, although it crosses a wide variety of private, state, federal, and Native Alaskan lands, it is administered as one entity by the Bureau of Land Management. Segments of the trail have served as trade routes for Alaska's native peoples for centuries. Russian fur traders later used trail segments for building their trading network. Existing sections of trail were tied together after a series of gold strikes occurred near Nome, Flat, Ophir, and adjoining areas.

In 1908, the U.S. Army's Alaska Road Commission was directed to survey and mark the trail between the ice-free port at Seward and the boomtown of Nome on the shores of the seasonally ice-bound Bering Sea. During the height of its historic use, the main trail was dotted with roadhouses approximately every 20 miles (or a good day's walk). Many of these roadhouses still exist despite the ravages of man and nature.

BLM is responsible for the protection and preservation of the historic properties on many federal lands. It is also working to inform and educate the public about trail history. The reasons for this education effort upon trail history are varied. For example, few people know that the idea for the popular annual Iditarod sled dog race originated as a reenactment of an emergency medical



serum run to Nome, not a gold rush event. In 1925, the lives of everyone living in and around Nome were in danger due to a diphtheria epidemic. Vaccine was heroically rushed to Nome by relays of dog teams; the system of roadhouses along the trail allowed these efficient relays. Without the background knowledge of the diphtheria epidemic, the Iditarod race becomes simply an isolated sporting event for those involved in it today.

Cultural Resources Along the Trail

There are over 300 known historic and prehistoric sites located on or near the Trail. The vast majority of these sites are located off the road system. In many cases sites are only accessible by helicopter or snowmachines in the winter. This situation has both positive and negative impacts upon these sites. The lessened access means less vandalism—however, monitoring and stabilization costs skyrocket. Remote locations do not always deter vandalism. For example, sometime during the winter of 1992 the roof of the Alaska Commercial Company Store in the town of

Left, the Alaska Commercial Company Store before roof removed in 1992.



Right, the Alaska Commercial Company Store after the roof had been removed, 1992.



Iditarod was removed for reuse by people on snowmachines. The damage was not discovered until several months later when a BLM crew in a helicopter was working in the area.

Management Directions

Because the gold rush associated with the Iditarod trail is so recent (1896-1927), a rich reservoir of journals, photographs, and oral histories exists. During the mid 1980s, the Bureau of Land Management interviewed people who used and lived along the Trail during the height of trail activity. (Many of these people have since died.) Unfortunately, many had not signed a release form so that this data could be published—once this problem is dealt with by finding and getting permission from the families of these people, transcriptions will eventually be available to the public. These collections are still on tape, but the BLM Anchorage District Office plans to have these interviews transcribed this winter.

A more recent oral history project occurred in conjunction with a building survey of the town of Flat. This work was conducted under a cooperative agreement with the State of Alaska's Office of History and Archaeology. When the building sur-

vey is complete, both the building survey and the oral histories will be published as companion volumes by the BLM Anchorage District Office.

Most recently, BLM assisted the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in getting a University of Alaska at Fairbanks field school in historic archeology set up at the abandoned village of Dishkaket. This village, located on the Innoko National Wildlife Refuge, was originally an Athabaskan village. When gold was discovered nearby, it became a hub for several Iditarod Trail segments. Results of the excavation will be forthcoming in a doctoral dissertation by Mary Ann Sweeney.

Directions for the future of BLM cultural resource management along the Iditarod Trail include National Register nominations, interpretive sites along a section of historic trail near the town of Girdwood, and the cataloguing of a collection of historic Iditarod Trail photographs in Nome.

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Historic Trail Preservation by Handshake Can Certification Agreements Protect Trail Resources?

On January 24, 1991, Oklahoma rancher Dan Sharp signed a certification agreement with the National Park Service making part of his ranch, Autograph Rock, the first certified trail on the Santa Fe National Historic Trail. While such certification involved a written agreement, it has no more weight than a verbal agreement and a handshake. Neither party is legally bound to the terms of the agreement. Either may back out of the agreement at any time and for any reason. The agreement spells out how both parties may work together in partnership and in good faith to keep the terms of the agreement in order to preserve the historic resources of the site and to make them available to the visiting public in a manner that protects the owner's property and rights.

What is Site and Segment Certification?

For historic preservation advocates who believe that to preserve a historic resource an agency or organization must own the land, or at

least a preservation easement, such an agreement might appear to offer little or no protection. However, we believe that these agreements are central to protecting historic trail sites and developing sound partnerships in a manner consistent with the National Trails System Act.

The concept of site and segment certification originates in section 3(a)(3) of the National Trails System Act, which recognizes that "Only those selected land and water-based components of a historic trail which are on federally-owned lands and which meet the national historic trail criteria established in this Act are included as federal protection components of a national historic trail." It then goes on to state that "The appropriate Secretary may *certify* (emphasis added) other lands as protected segments of an historic trail upon application from State or local governmental agencies or private interests involved if such segments meet the national historic trail criteria established in this Act and such criteria supple-